A threat to Grassy Narrows' long struggle for eco justice

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Indigenous peoples have been stewarding their lands and waters for millennia, and there is increasing legal recognition that Indigenous and treaty rights must be a fundamental consideration in how such lands are governed. Yet, under Ontario's online prospecting system, anyone can register a mining claim on Indigenous territories for a paltry $50 per parcel - without ever visiting the territory, let alone having obtained the consent of the Indigenous people who live there.

Ontario insists that under provincial mining regulations, it can award mining claims and permit mining exploration and extraction against the will of Indigenous communities. This speaks to the Ontario government's shameful disregard for Indigenous rights, and its wilful dismissal of international agreements and Canada's reconciliation mandate. Canada signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2016. This international agreement upholds Indigenous peoples' collective rights, including their governance over traditional lands and waters, and requires free, prior and informed consent for activities happening in them.

Grassy Narrows First Nation (Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek) has never given its consent to prospecting or other industrial activities in its territory. Yet, an investigative report by the Toronto Star has found that there is a literal gold rush of mining claims underway, by companies like British Columbia-based Trillium Gold. In a front-page Toronto Star investigation by Sheila Wang, the paper reported that there are nearly 4,000 registered gold mining claims that, if developed, would threaten Grassy Narrows' constitutionally enshrined rights to their lands and waters, as well as the livelihoods and cultural survival of its Anishinaabe people.

This latest industrial incursion into Grassy Narrows by the mining industry follows ongoing devastation inflicted on the lands, waters and people of Grassy Narrows by resource development and hydro dams. In the 1920s, construction of a hydroelectric dam flooded Grassy Narrows, destroying wild rice harvesting areas and burial grounds. Grassy Narrows' forests have been ravaged by clearcut logging and, perhaps most alarming, the community continues to suffer the horrific effects of industrial mercury pollution - 10 tonnes of which were dumped into the Wabigoon River by a pulp and paper company in 1962 and never cleaned up. That environmental catastrophe has contaminated fish and poisoned local residents to this day. Grassy Narrows' community members continue to suffer from tremors, pain, impaired sight, speech and hearing, loss of muscle coordination and premature death as a result of exposure to mercury poison, including in the womb.

Grassy Narrows First Nation has consistently resisted the industrialization of their boreal forest home, blockading logging and drawing global attention to their decades-long struggle for environmental justice. In 2018, Grassy Narrows passed a Land Declaration that prohibits all industrial and mining activity on their lands - in part, because of concern that logging could exacerbate the mercury crisis by releasing toxins settled in the soil.

The Land Declaration reaffirms Grassy Narrows' right to decide whether and how resource development can occur in its territories with the powerful words: "We assert our inherent sovereignty and our inalienable right to self-determination on our Indigenous homeland. Our land and our rights are given by the Creator and only the Creator can take them away."

As part of the Land Declaration, Grassy Narrows has declared the entirety of its traditional territories as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA). Unlike conventional protected areas which separate humans from nature, this innovative form of conservation governance provides for both social and ecological revitalization. Rather than establish a few islands of protected habitat within a sea of industrial development, Grassy Narrows is protecting all of its lands within the IPCA, while committing some places to an Indigenous-led conservation economy that is centred around ecological restoration, the sustainable harvesting of plants and animals and ecotourism.

Grassy Narrows' Land Declaration represents a long-term commitment to the protection and restoration of nature, and elevates their Indigenous rights and responsibilities. The people of Grassy Narrows continue to suffer terribly from decisions made by successive governments in Ontario, which have resulted in unmitigated ecological damage and devastating impacts to community health and well-being. That Grassy Narrows now faces the prospect of mining in its watershed - which remains poisoned by mercury and has been extensively logged of its trees - makes a mockery of reconciliation.

The Ontario government and mining companies must respect Grassy Narrows' Land Declaration, and abandon any claim staking and mining exploration within its declared IPCA.

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